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# Book Review: Dream Chasers: Immigration and the American Backlash by John Tirman

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**Tirman, John. *Dream Chasers: Immigration and the American Backlash*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2015. ix + 205 pages. Paperback, \$28.95.**

Barack Obama implied that advocates of southern border security were racists even though Mexico is not a race. Likewise, Donald Trump once thought it was politically, legally, morally, and/or logistically possible to deport the undocumented population. Congress has yet to replace the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, leaving President Obama's tenuous DACA to symbolize thirty years of failed "comprehensive immigration reform."

Into this morass steps John Tirman's *Dream Chasers: Immigration and the American Backlash* (2015). *Backlash* includes chapters on public education in Tucson, factory workers in New Bedford, Dreamers, turmoil and migration from Mexico and Guatemala, and Congress. Tirman links chapters through the idea that post-2001 immigration raids disperse and intimidate migrants, but accomplish little else. Highlights include a digression on classic liberalism in Chapter 2, rich descriptions of Tucson and New Bedford, and running comparisons of Black and Latino historical migrations. A timely element is the contrast between high-achievement Dreamers and Latino criminals.

Readers interested in lighter treatment of the Mexico-U.S. border could watch South Park's *Last of the Meheecans* (2011), which lampoons Arizona's Joe Arpaio; NatGeo's *Border Wars*; and the 2004 film *Day without a Mexican*. Darker visions come from the documentary *Cartel Land* (2015); the film *Sicario* (2015); Robert Kaplan's *Empire Wilderness* (1998), which foresees psychological Balkanization based on geography, race, language, reservations, and crime; and X-Files' *El Mundo Gira* (1997), where an undocumented migrant contracts a chupacabra virus.

Some may share Tirman's hostility and befuddlement towards those who would defend Anglo-Protestant culture or the southern border, despite the persistence of similar problems across virtually all nation-states. Indeed, the index includes multiple entries for "right-wing extremists" and "right-wing media," but zero for "left-wing" anything. Tirman's unwillingness to label the immigration Left as he does the Right, and unintentional nationalism and ethnocentrism that traces major problems back to the U.S. or Anglos without fail, make it hard to recommend *Backlash* to casual or novice readers.

Chapter 1 sets the tone by placing quotes around *legal* and *illegal* (p. 1-3), which signals the theoretical premise that states govern not via rule *of* law, but rule *by* law, created to serve the dominant class, in this case Anglos who require cheap labor. From Tirman's perspective, multiculturalism on behalf of labor poses no threat to Anglo capital. He therefore dismisses the economics of the immigration Right: "The claim to be pro-worker is difficult to maintain when one votes against raising the minimum wage, against extending unemployment benefits or food stamps, and against most employment-generating measures" (p. 17).

Because such arguments make no sense, the "primary source of resistance to immigration" must be cultural (p. 19). Tirman thus finds an independent variable in Samuel Huntington's controversial "Hispanic Challenge" in *Foreign Policy* (2004) which argued American identity was morphing into uncharted territory because of Mexican immigration. Huntington's callous treatment of the Spanish language in that article could be explained as his attempt to lobby Congress to include English certification in the immigration reform bill that people thought would follow the 2004 elections. "Hispanic Challenge," however, used photographs that arguably emphasized the "brownness" of Latinos, which gives credence to Tirman's claim that border hawks are motivated in part by race.

But Tirman dismisses the comparative origins of Huntington, who postulated a perfect storm of events that made Mexican immigration unique. One dimension includes the original enmity and loss of territory from Mexico to the U.S., and strained bilateral relations thereafter; a land border; and consistent gaps in political and economic development. The second dimension includes the post-1965 advent of Mexico as the primary source of immigrants; illegality mixed with legality; and the concentration of Mexican-Americans and public Spanish in regions that used to belong to Mexico.

The identification of such factors as potential hazards to national cohesion comes from international and comparative more than American politics. Yet Tirman (p. 165) cites surveys from Jack Citrin et al. "Testing Huntington" in *Perspectives on Politics* (2007) to argue that Latinos are in fact assimilating, after Tirman earlier condemned expectation that they should. Citrin was more cautious, noting that surveys might not adequately measure historical trends in assimilation or include undocumented Latinos.

Despite the stated primacy of culture, Tirman does not necessarily treat politics as independent of economics. He laces the book with Marxism, critical race theory, Foucault (the state "disciplines" domestic labor by importing cheaper immigrants (p. 150) and world systems: "The neoliberal economic policies that drive migration from Mexico and Central America are very difficult to change because they involve such high stakes for American corporations and the politicians who accept the dogma of 'free trade'" (p. 177).

Even at the end, it is not clear when or why the "backlash" of the title occurred since Tirman sees hostility to immigrants and non-Anglos as predating 9/11. Consider that Texas legalized in-state tuition and aid to undocumented students in 2001. David Branham's "The Influence of Seclusion," *Midsouth Political Science Review* (2015), has likewise identified a de facto sanctuary between the Mexican border and interior highway checkpoints. However, Austin recently condemned sanctuary cities like Houston. What changed? Perhaps the migrant crisis of 2014 was a tipping point. The Trump spectacle clearly dates to media coverage of these children.

Separatist referenda since 2014 do not necessarily bode well either. Scots speak English, British speak an official language of the European Union, Catalans speak Spanish, and the Obama-Trump era has revealed the extent to which English-speaking Anglos in coastal Blue and

interior Red states despise and prefer looser ties to each other. In times like these, any trace of political separatism must be unromanticized, especially if cultural, political, and socioeconomic inequalities are already mixed together as along the Mexico-U.S. border.

In conclusion, Tirman brings a particular viewpoint to immigration reform, but so do others. The primary contribution of *Backlash* is perhaps to illustrate passions that make “comprehensive” reform improbable and piecemeal action the new normal.

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